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ABSTRACT

Pluralism can be defined as a society in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, and social groups maintain participation in and development of their traditions and special interests while cooperatively working toward the interdependence needed for a nation's unity. Pluralism is being practiced, taught, and expanded in community, preschool, elementary, high school, and college campus programs. (ABL)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Personnel Services

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Pluralism and Education: Its Meaning and Method

Joan T. England

Overview

The philosophy and ideology of pluralism is not new but one whose time has come for actualization. Education is providing experience for students, teachers, counselors and the community to nurture and practice pluralistic thought. The philosophy of pluralism is not restricted to the "purist" educational environment but is being extended to encompass teacher in-service training and community-based involvement and input. Teachers and the community at large are acquiring an awareness of pluralism through subtle methods of dialog and participation. Schools are expediting the implementation of pluralism through activities, workshops, courses, and small groups. These processes often fit under the name of multicultural issues and concerns; frequently the use of the term "pluralism" is avoided. Accurate definition may assist in the transition toward truly pluralistic thought.

Pluralism can be defined in a number of ways. The definition which seems most encompassing is the following: a society in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious and social groups maintain participation in and development of their traditions and special interests while cooperatively working toward the interdependence needed for a nation's unity. The focus of most definitions evolves around the elements of interdependence, development and cooperation among diverse peoples of the world.

Actualizing Pluralism

Although counselors, schools, social service components and communities may not label their activities pluralistic in nature, there appears to be a pluralistic thread which runs through the weave of fabric of their teachings and philosophies. Examples of the variety of ways in which pluralism is being practiced, taught and expanded include the following methods.

Community

Innovative programs which have turned to opening the lines of communication to the community have produced remarkable results. In Lake Forest School District in Harrington, Delaware the situation of community linkage was addressed (VanSciver, 1989). The district had a 17% Black enrollment but not one Black was a member of the National Honor Society although several were eligible but chose not to apply. The entire administrative team and counseling staff were white. To whom would a Black youth with a problem go? There were a few Black teaching staff but none anywhere else. A meeting was held with members of the Black community to discuss their perceptions of the school district's effectiveness in meeting their needs. Discussion was frank and clear and items of concern were discussed and in turn acted upon. Other meetings were scheduled to continue the dialogues. With the advent of these meetings, Blacks began to become integrally involved in their children's educations. Service to all students in this school district has increased through these efforts.

Preschool

As early as preschool, youngsters are learning about pluralism in an experiential sense. Barbara Thomson (1989), who teaches 4- and 5-year olds in St. Louis, MO, encourages this age group to "see beyond appearances" by offering them a choice between the contents of a large elegantly wrapped box and a small dirty carton. The children all want what is in the big, beautiful carton but, upon pondering, believe that something "yucky" or delightful could be in either box. Upon opening the boxes the children find garbage in the big box and a group snack in the little box. The discussion which follows this activity promotes the child's ability to transfer this tangible idea of "wrappings" to the real world of other children and how they are "wrapped" or dressed or appear. Other transference of learning takes place when discussion evolves around other times when appearance is not the most reliable indicator of worth.

Thomson's firm conviction that children must "do" and experience to truly learn is additionally noted in her many role-playing ideas for children. She continually emphasizes the individual in a group experience as opposed to a strictly individualistic orientation. This philosophy and her suggested activities provide needed practice for children in a pluralistic society.

Elementary

Later in the elementary school years, teachers can help "celebrate diversity" and develop group respect with their students. To develop the idea of pluralism, children can create a classroom quilt to which each student contributes a square that is designed to represent his or her ethnic background; plant a small farm or garden project to allow children to experience the planning and cooperation required with each other, the earth and nature in planting their crops, harvesting and reaping the benefits or sharing the failures together. Children could create a mural in a similar way or have students independently research and report on various cultures. (Mack, 1988).

High School

Group counseling has a particular impact in the high school setting. *Anytown: A Human Relations Experience* (McWhirter, Paluch, & Ohm, 1988) outlines a group experience for high school students to promote direct, intergroup contact and increased racial tolerance among students. The process of Anytown involves the promotion of group experience based on working together, sharing and listening. Each day of the week has a theme and the small groups are guided through experiential activities to help process the theme and become more fully attuned to themselves and others

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in their small group. The intimacy of daily contact and interaction helps to make the groups realize that race, religion, sex, age and other physical or social features are not sufficient bases for prejudice and discrimination. The Anytown program claims that the we-consciousness that is promoted tends to develop into friendships that transcend racial, ethnic, sex, religious, age and other differences.

College Campus

One of the most active environments in reacting to pluralism has been the college campus. College campuses have developed training programs to diminish prejudicial attitudes and to promote unlearning racism. These efforts by universities help to bridge the gap for minority students. Most of these programs develop their ideas through a workshop or brief training program. Examples of these programs include a word association exercise which consists of six minority group descriptors typed on a page leaving space for written associations. Because the goal was to focus on racism, sexism, homophobia and anti-Semitism, the six descriptors were as follows: gay man, Black person, woman, Hispanic person, Jewish person and lesbian. Participants were instructed to respond anonymously by writing down the first words that came to mind for that descriptor. Sheets were collected and responses written on the blackboard. Questions which followed included: "Which group received the most positive associations?" "The most negative?" "Why?" It seems few questions needed to be asked to precipitate discussion. Students subsequently expressed their hurt, fears and anger about prejudice from this activity and in their lives. Both students and faculty participating in this group rated the overall experience as highly positive. (Lasenza & Trout, 1990).

James Stewart (1991), states that the design and implementation of diversity planning are most effectively undertaken as an integral part of overall institutional planning rather than as independent processes.

Questions for Your Consideration

The following questions may provide fodder to provoke further pluralistic thinking.

1. How does the powerful ideology of individualism limit the realization of pluralism? (Olneck, 1990)
2. How can moral development be modified to educate individuals on three levels: (a) as members of a large society, (b) as members of a subgroup, (c) and as individuals free to explore potentialities beyond any group membership? (Haberman, 1990)
3. How does the media (television), assist or hinder in developing views of pluralism? (Piepe, 1990)
4. How can promoting diversity splinter as well as enlarge moral communities? (Opotow, 1990)
5. How does the language we use inhibit pluralistic thought? (i.e., subculture, subgroup)
6. Could we now be in an interval of redefinition before a higher ethos emerges that both tolerates and integrates pluralism? (Olneck, 1990)
7. Do we need to rethink/redefine multicultural counseling? (Speight et al., 1991)
8. How can we re-evaluate the trends toward courses in multicultural counseling and teach all courses in a pluralistic mode? (Journal of Counseling and Development, 1991)

Conclusion

The thesis of pluralism is truly summarized by an old Jewish folktale about a rabbi who is asked how one can know the moment of dawn. The rabbi says simply, "Dawn is the moment when there is enough light to see the face of another as that of a brother or sister." (Thomson, 1989). Dawn has not come to our world as yet, but when it does, pluralism will be the byword of all.

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